A Comparative Analysis of the Role, Representations and Architectural Identity of Public Space in Medieval and Contemporary Cairo

Authors : Muhammad Feteha

Abstract : The socio-political Middle East scene has radically changed over the last decade, and one major contributor to this change was the Egyptian revolution of 2011. The massive impact of this revolution that originally started as a small protest in the Tahrir square has attracted more scholars to study the public space in Egypt, where it has become a necessity in order to understand and improve the socio-political conditions. The status of public space in Egypt has been deteriorating due to many reasons, including privatization and neglect. This paper studies one of the major problems of the contemporary public space in Cairo, which is the lack of identity. This takes place through a comparative analysis between selected case studies from both medieval and contemporary Cairo. The theoretical framework upon which the analysis is based views public space as a 'container of social action' and a 'product of spatial practice'. Through the 'deciphering of space', differences in the socio-political role, symbolism, and identity of public spaces between both eras are shown. The paper aims to extract some lessons from public space in medieval Cairo, which was truly the 'centerpiece of the public realm' and a 'fundamental expressions' of the unique trans-dynastic architectural identity of Cairo. In addition, it suggests some strategies to revive the Cairene identity of public space instead of constructing new ones to be only 'utilitarian spaces used for circulation' and lack any identity.